

Promising Practice: Working with Individuals with a Criminal Background  
New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services  
Office of Minority Health and Refugee Affairs  
Health Profession Opportunity Project (HPOP)

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The New Hampshire Health Profession Opportunity Project (HPOP), a Health Profession Opportunity Grants (HPOG) program funded by the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Family Assistance, has made an affirmative decision to accept individuals into the program who have criminal records. This practice is informed by employer feedback; a number of employers that work closely with the program through its business advisory councils have indicated that having a record will not automatically rule out an applicant for employment. Additionally, the program has made a philosophical decision that, to the extent possible, it will contribute to providing a second chance to otherwise marginalized individuals.

At the same time, HPOP is selective about these admissions and considers such variables as what the offense was, how long ago it occurred, and what the applicant has done since then to change his or her life and to make amends where appropriate. Program staff also listens carefully to how the applicant talks about the offense and the impact it had on the applicant's life and the lives of those around him or her, including the victim, if there was one. Especially, they listen for indications that the individual recognizes the error of his or her ways and takes responsibility for the act in question. Because staff must also assess employability within healthcare, an individual's healthcare career goal is a factor in the decision to admit to HPOP as well. Staff are frank with these applicants that their process may present more challenges than most and that they must be prepared, with the program's support and partnership, to do the extra work required to increase their marketability.

Individuals are referred to job developers at different times in the process of training and career preparation, but when a participant has a record, contact is often made sooner in the process. That gives the job developer more time for the work to prepare for job search, to maximize potential hires.

New Hampshire HPOP job developers implement a process of coaching strategies and portfolio development in addition to routine job search skills training. Some of these more specialized steps and strategies include the following:

1. Participants respond to routine job developer intake questions but are also questioned about criminal history and asked to describe criminal events in their own words.
2. Job developers and participants begin working together to assemble a professional portfolio.

- Create a strengths-based résumé to help participants rebuild confidence to approach former employers and work initially within existing networks.
  - If participant is not already engaging in relevant volunteer work, job developer will suggest doing so.
  - Participant is encouraged to write a cover letter to be used to apply for paid employment, volunteer work, and internships.
  - Participant is encouraged to get references and letters of recommendation from former or present employers, colleagues, church members, volunteer coordinators, sponsors/12-step members, or caseworkers. Among other things, this process can help rebuild contacts that may be essential to secure employment.
3. Participants practice interview skills, taking into account the challenges of criminal background discussion with hiring managers.
- Participant writes a letter of explanation for job interviews where s/he acknowledges not only responsibility for criminal actions but also positive changes that have occurred since that event.
  - The hope is that the message of participant's marketability, ability, and skills has been reinforced through positive volunteer experience, recommendations, positive references, and continual review of interviewing skills.
  - It is critical that the participant develop self-confidence that is apparent when disclosing criminal history to employers. Self-confidence is built on a process of asset development and recognition of self-value over time that mitigates the shame and diminished self-worth that is often apparent in individuals with criminal histories.
4. Participants maintain enthusiasm, encouraged by staff to follow these steps:
- Break down large goals into smaller, more immediate goals in order to experience success.
  - Attend discipline-related training opportunities and continuing education when possible.
  - Continue practicing interview skills.
  - Learn to write a thank-you letter post-interview.